



Exploring and Extending Personal Response through Literature Journals

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Exploring and extending personal response through literature journals

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The literature response journal has been repeatedly suggested as an effective means of capturing emerging reader response while linking writing to the reading process (Bauso, 1988; Ruppert & Brueggeman, 1986). Flitterman-King (1988) aptly described a literature response journal as "a repository for wanderings and wonderings, speculations, questionings...a place to explore thoughts, discover reactions, let the mind ramble...a place to make room for the unexpected" (p. 5). Not only does the response journal provide the freedom to focus on the expression of personal thoughts, but it elevates reading to an active process of personal meaning-making (Hancock, 1992a).

Much of the research related to the use of response journals in elementary classrooms has been conducted by teacher-researchers. Several of these studies incorporated read-

aloud events followed by written response (Danielson, 1987; Kelly, 1990; Simpson, 1986), confirming that response could move beyond summary toward insightful thinking. Wollman-Bonilla (1989) utilized dialogue journals on the premise that children would invest more energy and interest in journal writing when the teacher wrote back to them. Barone (1990) employed dialogue journals to detect patterns of response that reflected retelling, personal subjective response, and questions related to text understanding. These studies collectively suggest that students transcend summary and explore other pathways to response if allowed to write continually while in the process of reading a text. While these findings substantiate the use of the literature response journal to capture reader response, a need to identify and build upon the content of these recorded thoughts warrants further investigation.

The purpose of this article is to assist teachers in encouraging intermediate-grade readers to explore the possible avenues of response that may be incorporated in literature response journals. As teachers begin to provide their students the freedom to express their personal responses, they are somewhat limited by a lack of knowledge of the types of response that will emerge in student journals. Some teachers are frustrated by students' ini-

tial responses, which seem like little more than disconnected summary. Other teachers who have used response journals over time are seeking suggestions to help them enhance the variety of student responses when new formats are introduced. This article advances research-based options for response, suggests initial guidelines for literature journals, and proposes ways in which classroom teachers can challenge readers to explore and expand the potential for personal response through literature journals.

Theoretical and research foundations

Teachers seeking theoretical support for using literature response journals in the elementary classroom find a strong advocate in Louise Rosenblatt (1978, 1982), whose transactional theory of reader response supports the expression of personal thoughts, strong emotions, real-life connections, and idiosyncratic meaning making during encounters with literature. Rosenblatt's quest for the aesthetic response to literature is sustained through a journal format that encourages personal connections with literature. Written response to literature is a powerful means of preserving those special transactions with books that make reading a rewarding, personal journey.

The content of written response has been extensively explored by Purves and Rippere (1968), who proposed a detailed categorization system for content analysis of written responses to a literary work collected from 13- to 17-year-olds. Consisting of 120 distinct categories divided into four broad categories (engagement-involvement, perception, interpretation, and evaluation), the system offered an extensive means of thinking about the process involved in reading and responding to literature. In spite of its numerous research applications (Applebee, 1977) and effective modifications (Odell & Cooper, 1976), this classification did not adequately address the need for analyzing the responses of elementary children to literature.

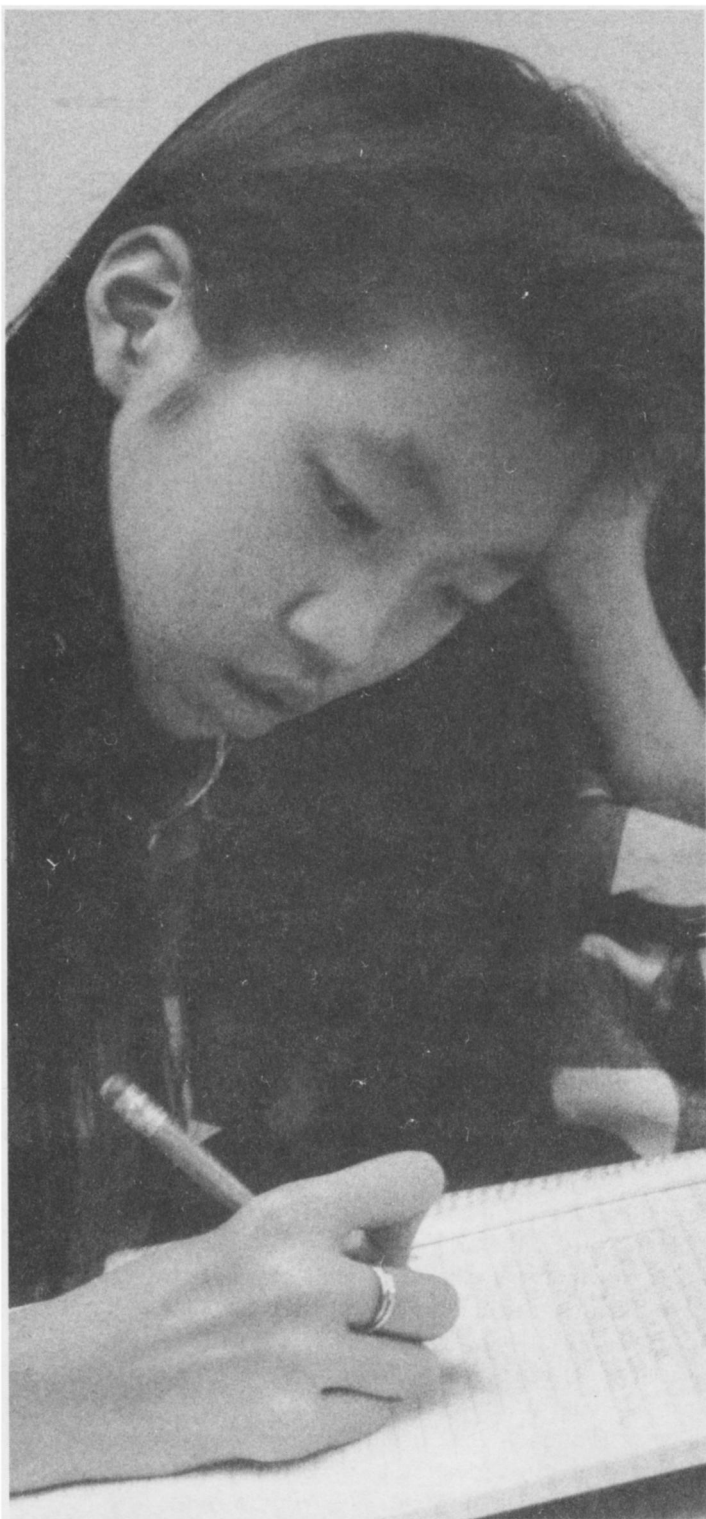
Benton (1984) and Studier (1979) suggested a freer, more flexible system suitable for use with elementary children which would retain the natural, living quality of children's responses. Research findings consistently point to a relationship between the kind of

responses readers make and their stage of cognitive development (Applebee, 1978; Appleyard, 1990; Bunbury, 1985; Cullinan, Harwood, & Galda, 1983). Allowing classification to evolve from the data to reflect the responses themselves and allow the style of distinct participants to emerge is important, as suggested by Galda (1980). These studies collectively support a closer look at written response to literature at various elementary age levels. In this study, the content of responses written by preadolescent readers (ages 11-12) was analyzed. The research upon which this article is based derives, categorizes, and discusses response through a series of simplified categories that retain the living quality of response of intermediate-grade readers. These

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categories have implications for the exploration and expansion of personal response options within literature response journals.

The response options shared in this article were derived from a classroom study of sixth-grade students who responded to four books of realistic fiction in a response journal format (Hancock, 1991). *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987) focuses on the survival of 13-year-old Brian Robeson in the Canadian wilderness. *One-Eyed Cat* (Fox, 1984) is an introspective study of guilt as 10-year-old Ned Wallis deals with a forbidden rifle shooting. *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Paterson, 1978) introduces a brash, sassy foster child desperately yearning for love and a permanent home. *The Night Swimmers* (Byars, 1980) explores independence and family relationships via Retta, a 12-year-old surrogate mother, and her two younger brothers. Categories of response were derived and verified through interrater reliability from over 1,500 literature response journal entries written in response to these books.



Students need opportunities to explore their personal thoughts about the books they are reading. Photo by Robert Finken

This article does not intend to generalize application of these categories beyond the limits of the original study. Teachers may use these categories as a foundation for encouraging students to move beyond writing summaries toward a richer variety and quality of response. While responding to literature is a natural process, the classroom teacher can awaken and expand natural response by encouraging an even deeper interaction on the reader's literary journey. Expanding the possibilities of response by introducing a wide variety of response options can encourage readers to explore an enriched, interactive involvement with a book.

Exploring response options

The following eight response options, derived from research classifications of literary response (Hancock, 1991), are divided into three major areas that many readers will encounter in responding to literature. These broad areas of response include *personal meaning making*, *character and plot involvement*, and *literary criticism*. These pathways of response serve as starting points from which to build responses to a book. They do not presume inclusiveness or exclusiveness, but encourage expansive exploration into personal response. The following discussion describes illustrative examples of the types of responses that fit each of the eight response options within the three broader areas. As these excerpts from students' literature response journals are shared, their potential for building both initial response and for expanding and enriching ongoing response should be considered.

The four **personal meaning-making options** listed below encourage students to move beyond summary responses to character inferences, plot predictions, and expressions of wonder or confusion in an attempt to achieve comprehension.

Monitoring understanding. Journal entries reflect responses that indicate readers are constructing meaning from the unfolding plot and becoming acquainted with the evolving characters. These types of responses usually occur during the reading of the first quarter of a book and seem to be a necessary stage for "getting into the story." Although these responses may begin with the reporting of facts or character feelings, they often journey to-

ward insightful statements reflecting the reader's personal construction, discovery, or affirmation of meaning. Student examples include:

In this story, Brian has divorced parents. (*Hatchet*)
Ned's really taking the gun being put away really hard. (*One-Eyed Cat*)
Oh, now I get it. The door is too heavy for the animals to open. (*Hatchet*)
These past few pages show how one lie can lead to a whole series of lies. (*One-Eyed Cat*)

Making inferences. Responses in this grouping reflect the effort of the reader to project introspective insights on the feelings, thoughts, and motives for behavior of the character. Statements generally include a degree of tentativeness or uncertainty about the character, as they often begin with "I think...It sounds like...He probably...She must..." Gaining insights into characters is an important step in comprehension, and responses of this type enhance understanding a text. Illustrative examples include:

I think Gilly is jealous of W.E. because Trotter loves him. (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*)
Brian must be very very hungry to eat a raw egg. (*Hatchet*)
Ned probably doesn't mean he wants the cat to die. (*One-Eyed Cat*)
Retta seems a little like Gilly Hopkins—rebellious and different. (*The Night Swimmers*)

Making, validating, or invalidating predictions. Readers often create a personal challenge during reading by speculating about what is going to happen to the plot as the story unfolds. They often pursue that challenge by confirming or denying a previously stated or unstated prediction. Since teachers encourage prediction as a higher level thinking skill, responses in this cluster move beyond guessing to synthesizing clues in formulating a prediction. Examples include:

I think the Secret was his mom's dating another man. (*Hatchet*)
I was right about the Secret! (*Hatchet*)
I bet Gilly's mother won't show up. (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*)
I didn't think she'd steal the money. (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*)

Expressing wonder or confusion. As the reader attempts to make sense of the text, responses may reflect his or her wonderings as to what is going on, what will happen next, or where the plot is moving. Often these collected thoughts are phrased in the form of a question. These responses seem to serve as a bridge to understanding. By asking questions

or expressing uncertainty, the reader is actually working hard to comprehend the text. Phrases may begin with "I wonder why...I can't believe...I didn't know..." Student examples include:

I wonder if Gilly is so mean because she wasn't brought up by her own mother. (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*)
The author is telling so many things...I got lost on p. 28. (*Hatchet*)
Is that cat supposed to be playing the role of some sort of sign? (*One-Eyed Cat*)
Bowlwater plant? Are these people really cheap or what? TV Ping Pong? (*The Night Swimmers*)

In sum, these four meaning-making categories evidence attempts by readers to make personal sense of the unfolding story through written response.

The following three **character and plot involvement** options encourage reader interaction and reaction to the characters and events of the story. These responses encourage a level of involvement often absent from initial response journals, moving the reader toward an even greater understanding of the text.

Character interaction. Response statements of this type indicate a sense of personal involvement a reader has maintained with a character. The reader can take on the role of the character with statements that begin "If I were...I would(n't)." Empathetic involvement is also revealed through "I know how he/she feels...I feel sorry for... Poor (character's name)." The reader often will share a related experience from his or her own life. The reader may even directly address the character or give advice to the character by implying "He should... She shouldn't..." Useful examples follow:

If I were Ned, I'd want to get the thought out of my head. (*One-Eyed Cat*)
Poor Gilly. I guess that's the way it is if you're a foster kid. (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*)
Johnny is like my brother. Roy is like my sister. I'm like Retta, not so bossy. (*The Night Swimmers*)
He shouldn't waste time waiting for the searchers he should get food. (*Hatchet*)

Character assessment. The reader's judgment of the actions and values of the character measured against his or her personal standards provides another avenue for response. Evaluative terms are often incorporated as traits of the character (i.e., nice, mean, dumb, smart). These responses often indicate the reader's awareness of growth and change in the character. Character evaluation, especially within the context of one's value system, is a

stage of response in which the reader not only projects judgment on the character, but actually reveals a piece of the reader's own moral fabric. Some illustrative responses include:

Brian is stupid for ripping a 20 dollar bill. (*Hatchet*)
It's really mean of Gilly to use W.E. in a plan to run away. (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*)
I don't think I like Mrs. Scallop. She is sort of mean and has crazy ideas like that Ned's mother got sick because Ned was born. (*One-Eyed Cat*)
Brian is getting better and having less self-pity on himself. (*Hatchet*)

Story involvement. The level of a reader's personal involvement in the unfolding plot of the story is often revealed through this response option. These responses may reflect reactions to sensory aspects of the story and often indicate personal evaluative terms (i.e., disgusting, gross, awful, weird, neat). These responses may also reveal a growing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the developing plot. They may also indicate an active or passive involvement with the book through anticipation of resuming reading. This outlet serves responses that share a level of involvement beyond a relationship with the character and reflect an involvement in the location, events, or time of the story. Some illustrative samples of this type of response include:

Eyes rolling back in his head until it is white showing. How gross! (*Hatchet*)
The scenery sounds so pretty. (*One-Eyed Cat*)
I wish Ned hadn't shot that poor cat. He did though. (*One-Eyed Cat*)
I can't wait to get on with my reading. I hope Shorty asks Brendelle to marry him. (*The Night Swimmers*)

Through conscientious attempts to become an active participant in literature via these involvement categories, the reader enhances his or her stake in the outcome of the story while becoming entrenched in the action of the plot.

While encouraging personal evaluative impressions of the book, the **literary evaluation** response option also suggests becoming a literary critic. This risk-free option encourages honest acknowledgement of personal literary tastes.

Literary criticism. Although this type of response is typically indicative of a traditional book report, it can move beyond the "I like/I don't like" format and often reveal an explanation for a positive or negative statement. These responses may also indicate praise or criticism of an author and his or her writing

ability or style. Often these responses reflect a comparison of the book, author, or literary genre with others known by the reader. Useful examples include:

These were boring pages because all they talked about were fish. (*Hatchet*)
I don't think the author should have Gilly use swear words. (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*)
I like this author because she has some suspense like the spy. (*The Night Swimmers*)
This is fun reading this part because it's like *My Side of the Mountain*. (*Hatchet*)

The eight response options outlined above serve as a springboard for extending and enriching responses in the literature response journal format. Although examples are limited to those from one group of students, they serve as a basis from which to awaken and build response. These response categories also present several options for consideration by individual readers as they continue on a journey through literature. If our goal is to encourage readers to express their personal responses as they venture through the pages of books, then these options serve as idea frames for exploration and enhancement of journal entries. Information in the next section of this article emphasizes how classroom teachers, knowledgeable about the content of response, can assist students in enriching and expanding their responses into some of these unexplored response territories.

Monitoring personal response

The classroom teacher plays a vital role in the expansion and enrichment of student response to literature. The teacher serves as a catalyst for encouraging exploration of the suggested avenues for responses presented in this article. Striving to awaken new modes of response within the reader is the responsibility of the teacher in the role of facilitator and response guide.

A teacher's first step in enhancing response to literature begins with an assessment of the kinds of responses the student is currently sharing. Knowledge of the wide variety of responses suggested in this article provides a basis for comparing students' current responses. Specific examples from two 11-year-old readers serve to illustrate this procedure.

Michael is a quiet, relaxed, sensitive sixth grader whose reading interests include animal fiction, westerns, and nature books. The aspect of reading that Michael likes best

is that “every book has somewhere to take you or something that it does to you.” In reading Michael’s four journals in response to realistic fiction through the perspective of the eight response options presented in this article, it was readily observed that Michael was utilizing the journal as a place to express his *literary evaluations*. Almost 40% of all his journal responses were related to why he did or did not like the book he was reading. In an interview, Michael commented that he viewed the journal as an “unraveling book report that told what you were thinking or feeling. That’s the main purpose of it.” Michael’s perspective on his literature response journal limited him from taking other avenues of response that might have enhanced his interaction with the book.

On the other hand, Ellen was an independent, expressive free spirit who was eager to share her responses to literature. Ellen professed total involvement in literature when she discussed what she liked best about reading.

I can’t say it’s quiet because if a battle is going on in the book, I can hear the battle.... I know people say you can’t hear a book, but I sort of can. Like you can almost hear everything said.

A reading of her four journals in light of the literature response options indicated a great deal of *character interaction and assessment*. In fact, 40% of her responses were in these clusters of response. Ellen viewed the journal as a place to “tell what you feel about the characters,” and believed its strength was “the opportunity it provided for honesty.” Ellen’s responses were rich in language and character involvement. Yet her limited, though effective, perspective on response failed to utilize many of the other channels that were possible to explore if they had been suggested to her.

These two cases stand as examples of how response can be limited if left to a personal perspective. Both Michael and Ellen can be admired for their acceptance of the freedom to respond in their individual modes. On the other hand, suggestions by their classroom teachers to expand their response horizons can move them even further along on their journeys through literature.

Providing response guidelines

Some teachers who are discouraged by minimal or limited responses in journals may

find the “Guidelines for Literature Response Journals” (see Table) to be an effective means of encouraging a variety of responses. The guidelines are intended to give students a fresh start in pursuing response. The first five points provide steps to set the environment for response—freedom to express fleeting thoughts, freedom from traditional writing evaluation, and freedom to share one’s own opinions and interpretations. The remaining points make suggestions derived from the previously mentioned response options. The final point in the guidelines may be the most important because it provides the invitation and encouragement to move beyond these brief guidelines and discover personal avenues of response. These guidelines are meant to awaken the reader to the possible outlets for exploring literature through response. They are, however, only a beginning. They provide the challenge to create, explore, invent, reach beyond, and discover an individual response style on the personal journey through a book.

Extending response options

Redirecting, refocusing, and expanding response is best accomplished through teacher comments directed at the current responses in students’ journals. Most importantly, comments to responses must be supportive. Students find that comments written several times per week help nurture the response journal process. Although students often share their responses with other students in literature circles, the recognition or reaction of the teacher is highly respected. Teacher comments should be nonjudgmental, encouraging, and thought provoking. The ultimate goal is to inspire deeper thought on the part of the student.

Once the supportive comment is shared, the teacher may desire to write a comment directing the student toward an unexplored area of response. These comments should be suggestive but not demanding. Response is a personal mode of expression, and demanding responses in a particular mode may negate the freedom of the response journal. On the other hand, well-directed suggestions may lead the student to explore a perspective of response that he or she may never have otherwise expressed.

Consider, for example, the *literary critic*, Michael. Many of Michael’s comments were

Guidelines for literature response journals

- *Feel free to write* your innermost feelings, opinions, thoughts, likes, and dislikes. This is your journal. Feel the freedom to express yourself and your personal responses to reading through it.
- *Take the time to write* down anything that you are thinking while you read. The journal is a way of recording those fleeting thoughts that pass through your mind as you interact with the book. Keep your journal close by and stop to write often, whenever a thought strikes you.
- *Don't worry* about the accuracy of spelling and mechanics in the journal. The content and expression of your personal thoughts should be your primary concern. The journal will not be evaluated for a grade. Relax and share.
- *Record the page number* on which you were reading when you wrote your response. Although it may seem unimportant, you might want to look back to verify your thoughts.
- *One side only* of your spiral notebook paper, please. Expect to read occasional, interested comments from your teacher. These comments will not be intended to judge or criticize your reactions, but will create an opportunity for us to "converse" about your thoughts.
- *Relate the book* to your own experiences and share similar moments from your life or from books you have read in the past.
- *Ask questions* while reading to help you make sense of the characters and the unraveling plot. Don't hesitate to wonder why, indicate surprise, or admit confusion. These responses often lead to an emerging understanding of the book.
- *Make predictions* about what you think will happen as the plot unfolds. Validate, invalidate or change those predictions as you proceed in the text. Don't worry about being wrong.
- *Talk to the characters* as you begin to know them. Give them advice to help them. Put yourself in their place and share how you would act in a similar situation. Approve or disapprove of their values, actions, or behavior. Try to figure out what makes them react the way they do.
- *Praise or criticize* the book, the author, or the literary style. Your personal tastes in literature are important and need to be shared.
- *There is no limit* to the types of responses you may write. Your honesty in capturing your thoughts throughout the book is your most valuable contribution to the journal. These guidelines are meant to trigger, not limit, the kinds of things you write. Be yourself and share your personal responses to literature through your journal.

Adapted from: Hancock, M.R. (1992b). Literature response journals: A journey through the mind of the reader. *Kansas Journal of Reading*, 8, 14-15.

directed at the story or the author's writing style such as:

This is getting real boring because the author is writing so much about one thing. The author keeps going back to the same thing "Mistakes" this is getting boring.

The teacher, noting Michael's limited perspective, wrote the following comment in an effort to encourage him to explore another avenue of response.

I really appreciate your efforts to critique *Hatchet*. It seems that you are a bit disillusioned with some of Brian's actions. You've been attributing that dissatisfaction to the author. Have you thought of sharing your advice with Brian?

Although he can't really hear you, your suggestions for plot changes may be directed to the main character as well as to the author. You may even find your involvement in the book will increase if you feel you can talk to Brian. Give this a try and see if you feel comfortable with this mode of response.

Later responses of Michael indicate that this mode of response was becoming a viable option for his expressions.

Brian shouldn't be sitting there thinking he should be out there working. Finding food and shelter...Brian should be using his mind to make

some crafty little gizmo to start a fire, catch an animal, or to get food. He should try anything that comes into his mind as a desperation tactic.

A similar option is available to Ellen, the involved, judgmental reader. Ellen exhibits *involvement with the character and plot* from the first response in her journal. There is little need to foster further involvement when she writes these two responses to *Hatchet* during the first eight pages of the book:

Never use God's name in vain, Brian, it won't help anything.

For Pete's sake, Brian, tell me what you know! The suspense is killing me.

These are exemplary interactive comments that teachers strive for in journals. Ellen is proficient in dealing with this level of involvement. Yet Ellen's response can be directed to other avenues for exploration—not in place of involvement, but in addition to it. For example, the teacher noted in Ellen's journals that she has attempted a minimal amount of predicting. During *The Night Swimmers*, Ellen states:

I think the spy is some really nice person.

The teacher wrote a comment prompting further exploration of predictions. The following comment is aimed at expanding Ellen's response horizons to elaboration of an area of response she has just minimally discovered:

I'm very interested in your comment about the spy. It seems your mind is operating like an investigative reporter. Try sharing more about just who that spy may be. Is it someone you've already been introduced to in the story? What makes you think the spy is nice? What evidence do you have that leads you to your conviction? If you feel comfortable expanding on this response, give it a try!

Ellen responded by later writing the following entry in her journal:

I think the spy is some really nice person who doesn't tell or mind. I think it's the colonel or Mrs. Roberts or an unknown son of the colonel and at the end they either get their own pool or get permission to swim in the Roberts's [pool].

As Ellen continues to read additional books, her *predictive responses* continue to grow. Her *involvement responses* continue, but this new avenue of response has opened her mind to another option on her reading journey.

The two examples illustrated above indicate the powerful influence of teacher comments in exploring and expanding student response. Students must feel the freedom to accept or reject suggestions offered. The response journal is foremost an avenue for personal expression. When that expression is limited, however, it is the teacher's responsibility to provide additional means for varying that response. As students in a trusting environment acquire more experience with response, they will feel free to accept or reject suggestions and only take on response mechanisms that feel comfortable to their style of responding.

Sharing personal response

Too often the literature response journal is restricted to a singular line of communication between the reader and the teacher. Although the teacher-student response relationship is a necessary one, it is too often the only means of monitoring and assisting in the exploration of response. Unique connections, personal experiences, and special ties to characters also warrant sharing with other readers. A trusting, risk-free, supportive environment for sharing of personal response can be created by the classroom teacher. A first step in this process may include choosing reading partners

who feel secure in sharing personal response with each other. Each reader becomes exposed not only to different personal responses but even to different modes of response being used. After gaining some confidence in one's own responses, a natural step is toward literature circles. This option provides an appropriate outlet for sharing the individual wonders of response with a small group. Savoring the glory of a response captured during a moment of reading and shared later as a permanent record of one's special thoughts may enhance the importance of one's own written responses. Not only will students be awakened to the individuality of response, but exposure to the variety of styles of responding may encourage further personal exploration.

In summary, as teachers encourage the exploration of options for expressing aesthetic response to literature with their students, they support the growing independence of each reader to interact with a book on his or her own terms. While a literature response journal provides a comfortable format for the collection and expansion of personal response, the teacher alone can provide the trusting environment in which readers feel the freedom to respond during their personal encounters with literature. Readers need the encouragement, direction, and guidance of the teacher as they attempt to extend their personal response options.

Articulation of aesthetic response in the classroom through a literature journal enables each reader to transform the printed page into a personal reading experience. Continued encounters with quality literature provide further opportunities to explore and extend personal response. As the reader continues a lifetime journey through literature, the fulfillment, acceptance, and encouragement awakened through personal response may ultimately lead to a gratifying experience as a lifelong reader.

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Call for papers for *The Reading Teacher* on literacy in the content areas

As children discover the world around them, they come to understand how they can use literacy to make sense of things and communicate their understanding to others. In the development of literacy, is there a distinction between "learning to read and write" and "reading and writing to learn"? For decades, this question has been a catalyst for debate. Will it still be germane for the next century? Will the traditional definitions of "process" and "content" still be appropriate? What criteria should teachers use in deciding how to balance the teaching of process and content? If elementary school children experience a shift from learning to read to reading to learn, when should this occur? What role should technology play? What are the effective ways of organizing curriculum to foster literacy learning across the content areas?

As teachers, we find that these questions warrant our attention and capture our imagination. As guest editors of the April 1994 themed issue of *The Reading Teacher*, we invite manuscripts addressing "Literacy in the Content Areas: Definitions and Decisions for the 21st Century." We invite authors to explore the philosophical and pragmatic implications of these questions. Readers would enjoy reflective articles on teaching and learning practices as well as innovative models for curriculum and instruction. Authors should submit double-spaced manuscripts of not more than 5,000 words, in triplicate, to either of the guest editors—authors outside North America may submit just one doublespaced copy. Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope for return correspondence—authors outside the U.S. submit just a self-addressed envelope. (Manuscripts cannot be returned.) Submissions will be reviewed by a guest editorial board of teachers from the Boston area. Deadline for submissions is **June 1, 1993**.

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